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ABSTRACT

In an effort to examine student transfer behavior from Oakton College (OC) in Des Plaines, Illinois, to public universities in the state, OC obtained from the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), a dataset of all students who received a bachelor's degree from an Illinois public university between 1980 and 1988, and then matched social security numbers from the IBHE dataset with all students on OC data files beginning in fall 1970, the first semester OC was open. When a match was found, selected demographic data were pulled from the OC dataset to create a new dataset providing the number and characteristics of OC students earning bachelor's degrees during the period 1980-1988. Study findings included the following: (1) 6,489 OC students received a bachelor's degree from an Illinois public university during between 1980 and 1988, representing 3 out of every 100 bachelor degree recipients; (2) 53% of the bachelor's degree recipients who had attended OC were female, 92% were white, and only 7% were above age 30 when they completed their degrees; (3) 1,678 students were in attendance at OC after receiving their bachelor's degrees; of this group, 612 also attended OC before receiving their bachelor's degrees; (4) 43% of the study population attended OC for just one semester, with 64% of these attending during a summer term; and (5) of the 669 students for whom academic records were available, 74% (n=496) earned associate degrees before transferring, and of these, 105 were earned through career programs. A review of other transfer study methodologies, a discussion of study and data limitations, and detailed data tables are included. (PAA)

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Oakton Students & Bachelor's Degree Recipients at Illinois Public Universities

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Yet Another Look at Transfer:

Oakton Students & Bachelor's Degree Recipients at Illinois Public Universities

Questions about the extent to which community college students transfer and receive bachelor's degrees continue to be raised locally and nationally. Scholars and practitioners attempting to respond to these questions are constrained by difficulties of gathering comprehensive and accurate data, differing definitions of "transfer," and reluctance on the part of many institutions to share individual student rather than aggregate data. Consequently, a variety of approaches to examining the transfer phenomenon are taken, with variances in definitions and data affecting the legitimacy, accuracy, comprehensiveness and utility of findings.

At Oakton we have used a variety of methods to examine the transfer behavior of our students, including alumni surveys, feedback from other colleges and universities, and surveys of non-persisting students.

The research reported here uses yet another technique and benefits from a unique dataset, described in detail below. The dataset is limited, however, in that it includes only public universities in Illinois. Our research about transfer suggests that only about one-sixth of the colleges and universities to which our students transfer send us information about the fact that they have transferred, and that for every student who transfers to a public university in Illinois, another 3-4 students transfer to an independent or out-of-state school.

An Important Technical Note on Identifying "Transfer" Students

In Illinois, most studies examining student transfer from community colleges to other institutions rely on the receiving institution having coded the student as a transfer. This approach results in undercounting the number of students who attend both a community college and university during their collegiate careers. While issues of coding are relatively technical, a brief summary of the limitations of transfer coding as practiced by Illinois colleges and universities reveals the reasons undercounting occurs.

1. **"Last College Attended" Method:** Typically a student is coded as a transfer from a given institution based on the last college the student attended prior to transfer, regardless of the number of credits earned there. Consequently a student who earns 45 credits at a community college, transfers to another institution for 15 credits, and then transfers to yet a third institution, will be coded as a transfer from that second college. Examinations of student transcripts quickly reveal the widespread pattern of multiple transfer, but coding practices capture only one institution as previously attended.

2. **"Minimum Credits" Method:** Some universities require a student to transfer a minimum number of credits, perhaps 12, before that student is coded as a "transfer."

3. **"Once a Native, Always a Native" Method:** When a student begins as a freshman at a university but attends summer school, or sometimes even a complete semester, at another institution, that student is usually retained on the university file as a "native" student, not a transfer student.

4. **"Phantom Student" Method:** A student must submit a community college transcript to a university before there will be even the consideration of coding that student as a transfer. Students not wishing to receive credits for work done elsewhere or concerned about a poor academic record may choose not to tell the university of prior college attendance.

Taken together, these factors as well as more idiosyncratic reasons such as using different social security numbers at different institutions result in undercounting the number of students who attend a community college and a university.

The New Dataset

We have obtained from the Illinois Board of Higher Education a tape of all students who received a bachelor's degree from a public university in Illinois during the period 1980-1988; data included for each degree recipient are the social security number, university awarding the degree, and year in which the degree was awarded. We then matched social security numbers of students on our own files beginning with fall 1970, the first semester Oakton was open. When a match was found we pulled selected demographic data about the student from our files, merged these data with the IBHE tape, and created a new dataset that enables us to determine the number and characteristics of Oakton students earning bachelor's degrees at Illinois public universities during the period 1980-1988.

Data for students included in this dataset and sources of the data are outlined in Table 1.

Findings

The numbers ... We found 6,489 students who attended Oakton and received a bachelor's degree in the period 1980-1988 from a public university in Illinois. The total number of public university bachelor's degree recipients during this period was 206,264. **Thus 3 of every 100 students who earned a bachelor's degree at a public institution in Illinois during the period under study attended Oakton at some time.**

Student characteristics ... Bachelor's degree recipients who had attended Oakton were nearly evenly divided by gender; females comprised 53% of the population and males comprised 47%. Nearly all (92%) of the students were caucasian; 5% were Asian and the remaining 3% were black, Spanish surnamed, or other. They were also primarily of traditional college age. Two-thirds received their bachelor's degrees when they were aged 23 or less, while only 7% were aged 30 or above when they completed their degrees.

Where did they go? ... Table 2 presents the number of Oakton bachelor's degree recipients from each public university in Illinois. The largest number of Oakton students receiving bachelor's degrees attended the University of Illinois at Urbana. This is in marked contrast to other transfer studies, which consistently indicate a relatively small number of Oakton students transfer to the U of I at Urbana, and results from the unique methodology used in the current study. Recall that most studies rely on the transfer institution coding a student as a transfer; students who enroll as freshmen but attend the community college for summer school are not reported as transfer students. In this study, however, a student who enrolled at the university during the regular academic year and attended Oakton for summer school *will* be counted as an Oakton student because the key determinant is a match of social security numbers.

When did they graduate? ... Table 3 presents the years in which students graduated from each university. At most institutions the number of Oakton students receiving degrees has increased substantially over time. Most bachelor's degree recipients receive that degree at a relatively young age. Therefore the increased number over time is probably not reflective of the cumulative effect of students being at Oakton and eventually earning the bachelor's degree, but rather is likely to be due to other reasons. These reasons include Oakton's increased enrollments in the 1980's, resulting in a larger Oakton base from which to draw; improved acceptance in the community of Oakton as a viable option for young students; and strong summer school enrollments prompted by the transferability of Oakton courses and difficulty of students at some senior institutions in finding space in required lower division courses at those schools.

As we will see below, however, more than 1000 students first came to Oakton after receiving their bachelors's degrees, and terms of attendance at Oakton are not available for another 415 individuals. Consequently data in Table 3 need to be interpreted with caution.

What's the pattern of attendance? ... We know from a number of institutional research projects as well as from state and national studies that many, perhaps most, college students do not follow traditional attendance patterns: enrollment and graduation from the same 4-year institution or attendance at a community college for two years followed by transfer to and graduation two years later from one 4-year institution. Rather, transfer and stop-in, stop-out attendance patterns are complex and varied.

To examine attendance patterns we constructed several new variables that relate years of attendance at Oakton with the year in which the bachelor's degree was granted.

These variables must be interpreted with caution, however. We are missing Oakton attendance data for 415 students, or 6.4% of the population, and while we have data about first and last terms at Oakton for all other students, we do not know whether they attended regularly between the first and last terms. Furthermore, where the Oakton first or last term is in the same year as the bachelor's degree was awarded, we do not know whether the student attended Oakton before or after the bachelor's degree was actually obtained. For example, we do not know if a student who attended Oakton for the first time in the fall of 1987 and who received a bachelor's degree in 1987 earned that degree at the end of 1987, and may actually have used fall 1987 Oakton credits for the degree (this is possible under limited circumstances), or earned that degree at the beginning of 1987 and came to Oakton as a bachelor's degree recipient who, for whatever reason, chose to take further coursework at the community college.

The first new variable, presented in Table 4, enables us to estimate the number of students who first attended Oakton prior to earning their bachelor's degree. While at first glance this seems to be the "typical" transfer, this is not necessarily the case. A student who started at a senior institution, then came to Oakton, even for just a summer, then went back to the senior institution to complete the bachelor's degree will be included in this group. Because we do not have data about when students entered the bachelor's degree-granting institution there is no way for us to differentiate the "typical" transfer from the student who stopped into Oakton at some point on the way to the bachelor's degree. Not included in the estimate are students who first attended Oakton in the same year they earned their bachelor's degrees. As reflected in Table 4, the majority of students attended Oakton prior to earning their bachelor's degrees, and this pattern holds true for all universities.

The next variable identifies students who attended Oakton after receiving their bachelor's degrees. Individuals may also have attended Oakton prior to earning the degree (see below). Again, students who last attended Oakton in the same year they received their degrees are excluded from the analysis. Table 5 presents findings, which indicate that 1678 individuals, or over one-quarter (28%) of the students for whom Oakton attendance dates are available attend Oakton in years after they receive their bachelor's degrees.

The third new variable (not presented in a table) identifies students who attended Oakton in years both before and after receiving their bachelor's degrees. A total of 612 students are in this group, or 10% of the number for whom Oakton attendance dates are available.

Interest is often expressed about the number of students who attend Oakton for one term only, especially with respect to those students who attend in the summer only. We were able to determine if a student attended Oakton for only one term and, if so, whether that was a summer term only. (Again, data are available for the 6074 students for whom Oakton dates of attendance are available). Table 6 presents findings by bachelor's degree granting institution.

Overall, 43% of students attended Oakton for just one semester or summer session. Sixty-four percent who came for only one term attended in the summer. Universities in the immediate area (Northeastern and University of Illinois-Chicago) have a lower percentage of students who attend Oakton for only one term and a higher percentage who attend for multiple terms than other schools. Summer school is particularly important for students at residential institutions outside the Chicago area. (Unfortunately, available data do not permit us to identify students who attend Oakton in multiple summers but not during fall or spring semesters.)

Data presented in Table 6 are somewhat misleading, because they include individuals first attending Oakton in the same or a later year than they earned their bachelor's degrees. Thus, to obtain a truer picture of the extent to which students attend Oakton for one term or summer session only and then transfer or return to their "home" universities, we looked at students who first enrolled at Oakton in years prior to receiving their degrees and how many of them attended for one term or summer session. Table 7 provides data. Just under two-fifths (38%) of students who attend Oakton prior to receiving their degrees stay for but one term or session. Put another way, a large percentage (62%) of these more "traditional" students are repeat customers at Oakton, attending the college for at least two semesters or terms. Students who eventually earn degrees at Chicago area schools (University of Illinois-Chicago and Northeastern) are even more likely to attend Oakton for multiple terms. (The small number of students at Chicago State, Governor's State, Sangamon State and Southern-Edwardsville render their percentages of one-term students fairly irrelevant in the overall analysis.)

The portrait of Oakton students receiving bachelor's degrees grows even sharper as we focus on students who initially entered Oakton as college graduates. We estimate this number by identifying a total of 1017 students who initially came to the college in years after having completing the bachelor's degree, and another 146 first came to Oakton in the same year as their degrees. Table 8 presents data by university. Note especially the small percentage (11%) of University of Illinois-Urbana students who first enrolled at Oakton after earning their degrees; this is yet further evidence of the use of Oakton by Urbana students for accruing credits toward their degrees during summer school.

In summary, what do data about the attendance patterns of students who have taken courses at Oakton and earned bachelor's degrees at public universities in Illinois tell us? They reveal that attendance patterns are complex, that 3 of every 100 bachelor's degree recipients at public universities in Illinois have or will attend Oakton, an estimated one-fifth of bachelor's degree recipients first come to Oakton after obtaining that degree, that relatively few older (age 25 or above) Oakton students earn their bachelor's degrees at Illinois public universities, that for many students Oakton is an important summer school option, and that whatever "traditional" notions about student attendance patterns drive decision-making and assumptions about success and effectiveness need to be rethought in light of empirical evidence that a linear path from community college to senior institution and a bachelor's degree in a 4-5 year period is a rare occurrence, indeed.

How did students do at Oakton? ... Some of the most crucial questions asked about community colleges and the transfer behavior of their students relate to the quality of students' performances at the community colleges. What grade point averages did they earn and how do these compare with grades earned after transfer? Do students who earn an associate's degree fare better after transfer than those who do not complete the associate's degree? Do students in career programs transfer, and how do they do?

Data available in this study provide just a few tantalizing clues to help us examine these questions. The Oakton student information management system retains on-line data about students' grades, curricula and degrees for a 5-year period. Data for students inactive at the college for 5 years are archived and can be retrieved only through the tedious and time consuming procedure of manually entering social security numbers. (Demographic data such as age and gender are more readily retrievable even for students away from Oakton for a long period of time.) We were able to retrieve Oakton academic data for only 1524 (23%) of the 6489 students in our dataset. Of these, 855 first enrolled at the college in the same or a later year than they earned their bachelor's degrees, making moot any information relating their Oakton experience to their achievements at their universities. Put another way, we have data about the Oakton academic performance for only 669 students who attended Oakton prior to transferring, and these 669 students will have attended Oakton fairly recently.

The limitations of the data preclude our making all but the most tentative statements about academic performance at Oakton. Given extreme caution, what can we say? Four hundred and ninety-six students earned associate's degrees at Oakton, 74% of the 669 students for whom we have academic data and who attended Oakton before receiving their bachelor's degrees. The largest number of students were in transfer curricula, although 105 of the 496 associate's degrees were the A.A.S, offered in career programs only.

Does this mean that most students who attend Oakton and eventually earn a bachelor's degree from a public university in Illinois obtain their associate's degree here? No, it does not. The vast majority of Oakton students who earn their bachelor's degrees attend here for only a brief time, one or a few semesters. Despite the Illinois compact agreement that is intended to encourage students to earn associate's degrees before transfer, relatively few real advantages accrue to students who do earn the associate's degree first, especially as several key universities do not subscribe to the compact (University of Illinois and Northeastern). For many students in our dataset Oakton was a summer school only, a place to earn credits transferable to their home institutions. Frustrating though it may be, our ability to understand the Oakton academic performance of students who go on to earn a bachelor's degree remains sorely limited in the research reported in this paper.

The new Illinois shared dataset currently being constructed through the cooperative efforts of all public colleges and universities will enable us to access a more comprehensive and richer source of information about the academic performances of Oakton students both

here and at senior institutions in the state.

How do we compare with other community colleges? ... The Illinois Community College Board has made the university graduates data tape available to all community colleges. To date only the College of DuPage has used the resource; their student information system allowed them to access far more data about students' performances at the community college than did ours, so their report is somewhat different in nature and depth from the Oakton findings. Perhaps the most interesting point is that 7.5 of every 100 students receiving a bachelor's degree from an Illinois public university in the period 1980-88 "was also a C.O.D. student at some point" (it is not clear how many of these students first entered C.O.D after receiving their bachelor's degrees). For Oakton the comparable figure is 3 of 100. Given that C.O.D. is larger than Oakton, this suggests that both institutions are experiencing roughly the same percentages of students attending the community college and earning bachelor's degrees.

Again, the shared dataset will enable researchers at the state level to make more complete and accurate comparative observations about the extent to which each community college enrolls students who go on to earn bachelor's degrees at public universities in Illinois, who return to the community college after earning a four-year degree, who transfer more than once among public institutions, who co-enroll in two or more schools at once, and who engage in yet other patterns of behavior that fall outside of what we have come to expect from community college students.

Concluding Comments

Although we know that 6489 Oakton students also received bachelor's degrees from Illinois public universities in 1980-88, and that this number is higher than is otherwise reported, we lack a frame of reference within which to anchor a meaningful interpretation of this number. Is this a "high" number? Is it a "good" number? How does this number "measure up" to what other colleges are doing, or what we "should" be doing, or what we can "reasonably expect"? Does this finding help us to understand or define or interpret a "transfer rate?"

None of these questions nor a host of other related questions are readily answerable from the research reported in this paper. Rather, the research enables us to make with more confidence the following observations:

- The number of students receiving bachelor's degrees at Illinois public universities who at some time attended Oakton is substantially larger than is reported in traditional transfer reports. The reason for the discrepancy lies in the methodology. Traditional reports categorize transfer students according to the last school attended prior to transfer. This research matched student social security numbers from two sources: all bachelor's degree recipients in the period 1980-88 and all students who have attended Oakton since the college's inception.

* Oakton draws many students who already have a bachelor's degree. To expect these individuals to transfer <u>after</u> attending Oakton or to apply the same indicators of "success" to measure their achievements as compared to students at the freshman and sophomore level would be ludicrous. Calculations of "transfer rates" or similar outcome measures must be sensitive to these students.

* A substantial number of traditional college students attend Oakton only briefly, often for a summer session, as they progress toward their bachelor's degrees. Oakton provides an important service for them. This role should be acknowledged, even as most of these students will never be included in usual studies of transfer that rely on the last college attended and/or a minimum number of credits earned at the community college for attendance there to be identified.

* Students who attend Oakton for multiple semesters or terms and who come to the college prior to earning their bachelor's degree are more likely to transfer to public institutions in the immediate Chicago area (Northeastern and University of Illinois-Chicago) than to transfer to Illinois public institutions outside the geographic area.

* Transfer behavior is more complex and varied than most people understand, are willing to believe, or even can imagine.

Table 1

Data and Sources

Variable	Source
Sex	Oakton application
Year of birth	Oakton application
Ethnicity	Oakton application (self-reported)
First term at Oakton	Oakton records *
Last term at Oakton	Oakton records *
University awarding bachelor's degree	IBHE data as provided by each public university
Year of bachelor's degree	IBHE data as provided by each public university
Oakton curriculum	Oakton records**
Oakton degree	Oakton records**

* Based on student being in college-level course or being enrolled as of tenth day of the semester; first term and last term data are missing for 415 students because of data definition and collection technicalities. In addition, if a student was enrolled in developmental courses only, the first term or last term data may reflect other terms in which the student was registered in college-level courses.

** Available for students at Oakton in 1987-1991 only.

Table 2

Bachelor's Degrees Awarded 1980-1988 to Oakton Students

University	Number OCC Students	Percent
Chicago State	5	.1
Eastern Illinois	205	3.2
Governor's State	11	.2
Illinois State	703	10.8
Northeastern Illinois	908	14.0
Northern Illinois	1310	20.2
Sangamon State	8	.1
Southern Illinois-Carbondale	447	6.9
Southern Illinois-Edwardsville	8	.1
University of Illinois-Chicago	773	11.9
University of Illinois-Urbana	1862	28.7
Western	249	3.8
Total	6489	100.0

Table 3

Bachelor's Degree Recipients by University and Year

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	Total
Chicago State		1			1	1		1	1	5
Eastern Illinois		11	15	23	34	31	26	33	32	205
Governor's State			1		1	1	1	2	5	11
Illinois State		24	39	62	93	100	131	129	125	703
Northeastern		77	76	95	105	128	141	131	155	908
Northern Illinois	70	80	88	126	181	206	198	182	179	1310
Sangamon State				1	2	1	1		3	8
Southern-Carbondale		29	40	53	51	58	84	71	61	447
Southern-Edwardsville					3		2		3	8
University of Illinois-Chicago		37	41	52	56	104	133	176	174	773
University of Illinois-Urbana				121	225	352	353	371	440	1862
Western		1	3	18	38	60	39	34	56	249
Total	70	260	303	551	790	1042	1109	1130	1234	6489

Table 4

Attended Oakton Prior to Earning Degree by Bachelor's Degree Granting Institution

Pattern	Number	Total Degrees from Institution*	Percent at Oakton First
First attended Oakton prior to earning bachelor's degree **			
Chicago State	1	2	50
Eastern Illinois	137	189	72
Governor's State	7	10	70
Illinois State	531	668	79
Northeastern Illinois	637	829	77
Northern	1008	1238	81
Sangamon State	5	7	71
Southern Illinois-Carbondale	307	406	76
Southern Illinois-Edwardsville	6	8	75
U of Illinois-Chicago	507	705	72
U of Illinois-Urbana	1578	1780	89
Western	191	232	82
Total	4915	6074	81

* Based on 6074 students for whom Oakton attendance data are available

** Does not include students whose first term at Oakton was in the same year as receipt of the bachelor's degree.

Table 5

Attended Oakton After Earning Degree by Bachelor's Degree Granting Institution

Pattern	Number	Total Degrees from Institution*	Percent at Oakton After
Attended Oakton after earning bachelor's degree **			
Chicago State	2	2	40
Eastern Illinois	57	189	28
Governor's State	3	10	27
Illinois State	196	668	28
Northeastern Illinois	315	829	35
Northern Illinois	363	1238	28
Sangamon State	2	7	25
Southern-Carbondale	133	406	30
Southern-Edwardsville	2	8	25
U of Illinois-Chicago	242	705	31
U of Illinois-Urbana	303	1780	16
Western	60	232	24
Total	1678	6074	28

* Based on 6074 students for whom Oakton attendance data are available

** Does not include 239 students whose last term at Oakton was in the same year as receipt of bachelor's degree. Of students listed in the table, 1017 first enrolled at Oakton in years after earning the bachelor's degree. Students included in this table may have attended Oakton both before and after receiving degree.

Table 6

Students at Oakton for One Term Only*

School	Total Number	Number-One Term	Percent-One Term Only	Number-Summer Only	Percent of One Term Students-Summer Only
Chicago State	2	0	0%	0	0%
Eastern Illinois	189	87	46%	47	54%
Governor's State	10	4	40%	1	25%
Illinois State	668	269	40%	172	64%
Northeastern Illinois	829	230	28%	53	23%
Northern Illinois	1238	510	41%	337	66%
Sangamon State	7	3	43%	3	100%
Southern Illinois-Carbondale	406	171	42%	83	49%
Southern Illinois-Edwardsville	8	6	75%	2	33%
University of Illinois-Chicago	705	264	37%	110	42%
University of Illinois-Urbana	1780	940	53%	771	82%
Western	232	115	50%	74	64%
Total	6074	2599	43%	1653	64%

* Based on 6074 students for whom Oakton term of attendance data are available